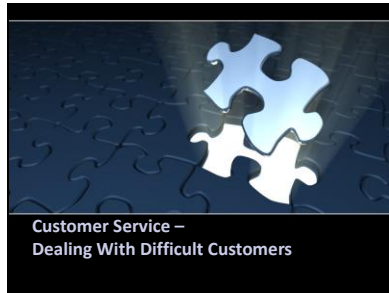


Slide 1



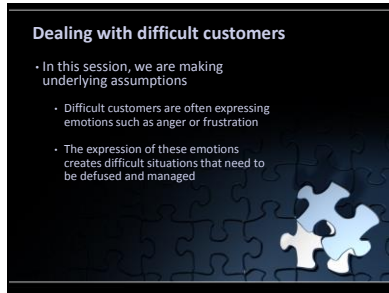
Welcome to lesson two in the Customer Service module. We have all had to work with difficult customers. So, what are some key principles for engaging customers who are challenging while working in the workforce system?

Slide 2



That is a good question. There are a lot of strategies that can be used when dealing with difficult customers. In this lesson, we will focus on several effective strategies that you can employ when dealing with difficult customers. These strategies have been combined into a five step process. We will review all five steps, which include identifying difficult customers, identifying different types of difficult customers, identifying reasons customers challenge us, and identifying techniques for managing challenging situations. While reviewing these strategies, it is important to note your safety and the safety of those around you should be your first priority. Each regional workforce board should have a safety plan. Please get to know your safety plan and when you should ask for help or remove yourself from a hostile situation.

### Slide 3

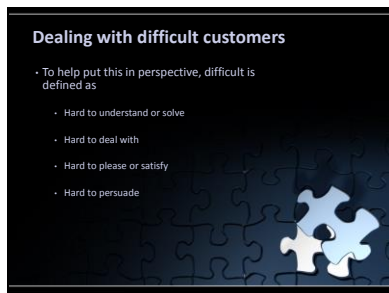


**Dealing with difficult customers**

- In this session, we are making underlying assumptions
  - Difficult customers are often expressing emotions such as anger or frustration
  - The expression of these emotions creates difficult situations that need to be defused and managed

In this session, we are making underlying assumptions that difficult customers are often expressing emotions such as anger or frustration. As we will discuss later in the session, customers often are not angry with the workforce professional but with the situations they find themselves in. Regardless, the expression of these emotions create difficult situations that need to be defused and managed. There may be other underlying emotions as well, such as sadness or a feeling of defeat. The same rules apply to the expression of these emotions as well.

### Slide 4



**Dealing with difficult customers**


- To help put this in perspective, difficult is defined as
  - Hard to understand or solve
  - Hard to deal with
  - Hard to please or satisfy
  - Hard to persuade

The definition of the word “difficult” provides details that help us understand the challenge of managing situations involving “difficult customers.” The first definition of “difficult” is “hard to understand or solve.” Does that sound familiar? When we are working with customers who are angry or challenging, it may seem like solving the problem or bringing customers back to a happy disposition is impossible. The other definitions of the term “difficult” provide even more insight. Let’s read it like we are talking about a customer who is being “difficult.” This customer is “hard to deal with,” “hard to please or satisfy,” and “hard to persuade.” So what do we do? Do we just give up? No. When we are dealing with difficult customers, we take it “one step at a time.”

Slide 5

**Step 1: Identifying difficult customers**

- Sometimes, we are so busy that we jump right into the situation without recognizing we are engaging a "difficult" customer
- To defuse a potentially difficult situation, we must first recognize that the person is angry, sad, frustrated or just plain "difficult"




So what are the next steps? Step one requires us to identify when customers are being "difficult." Why is this important? Sometimes, we are so busy that we do not stop and say, "This customer is being difficult;" or "This customer is angry, and I need to apply my strategies to manage this difficult situation." Instead, we jump right in. To defuse a potentially difficult situation, we must first recognize that the person is angry, frustrated, sad or just plain "difficult."

Slide 6

**Step 1: Identifying difficult customers**

- Anger, sadness and frustration are just emotions
- Recognizing that the customers are simply expressing emotions should impact how we engage them




We also have to recognize that anger, sadness and frustration are simply emotions. Our customers have the right to their emotions; unfortunately, these emotions impact how they interact with others. As professionals, we have to recognize that difficult customers are managing emotions that will influence how they interact with us.

Slide 7

**Step 1: Identifying difficult customers**

- Aggressive
  - This person expresses emotions quickly
  - Anger
  - Hostility




There are two types of difficult people. There are aggressive people and passive people. Aggressive people, express emotions quickly. Their emotions are often demonstrated in a hostile manner. You know that these individuals are angry, sad or frustrated because you can hear verbal expressions, such as yelling. Sometimes, you can tell that they are angry, sad or frustrated through their behaviors. Often times, aggressive individuals use sarcasm to express their emotions. These individuals are the scariest to deal

with because we are not sure where they will put all of their energy.

Slide 8

**Step 1: Identifying difficult customers**

- Passive
- These customers do not express their emotions out loud, but you can tell by their body language that they are not responsive and are angry or frustrated




While some individuals are aggressively expressive, others are passive in their expressions. Passive individuals do not express their emotions out loud. However, their body language and facial expressions give them away. When passive customers are angry or frustrated, they are closed off and often unresponsive. While such individuals may not be loud, their expression of emotions will impact how we engage them. Passively expressive customers can be just as “difficult.”

Slide 9

**Reasons customers become “difficult”**

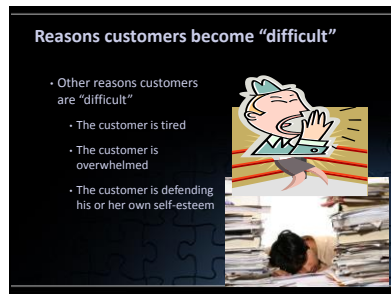
- Once you identify customers as angry or frustrated, you have to begin to understand the reason that they are angry or frustrated
- Many times, you will work with customers who are frustrated for reasons that are totally out of your control
- Sometimes, the issue is related to services received in the One-Stop Career Center
- Sometimes, the issue is unrelated to the One-Stop Career Center



Once you identify customers as angry or frustrated, you have to begin to understand the reason that they are expressing their emotions or being “difficult.” A person may become difficult by being aggressively expressive or passively resistant for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons are the results of circumstances that occur in the One-Stop Career Center. For example, a customer may have had to wait 30 minutes or longer to use a computer. This issue may not be in your control,

but the customer may still come to you and express how he or she feels. Sometimes, the issue is unrelated to the One-Stop Career Center. For example, there are customers who may have had to apply for benefits and go through a rigorous application process; as a result, they may take their frustrations out on you.

Slide 10



There are many common reasons why customers are "difficult." For example, customers may simply be tired and become irritated easily. Customers who are tired may express their frustrations early on rather than waiting patiently. Another reason customers become frustrated or angry is that they are overwhelmed. Many of our customers have been through difficult experiences. For example:


- Customers may be applying for benefits for the first time.
- Customers may have lost their jobs.
- Customers may have been working for many years and due to an unforeseen event, are forced to look for work again.

Many customers become difficult because they are defending their own self-esteem. Think about it; a customer who has been working for ten years is laid off. He or she now has to file for benefits; as a result, his or her self worth and self esteem are being challenged. You and your co-workers may be trying to help the customer, but the situation itself is bringing out emotions of hurt and anger.

## Slide 11

**Reasons customers become “difficult”**

- We simply do not know when customers walk through our door what has happened to them in the past few minutes, hours or days
- Have you ever taken your frustration out on someone else?

A photograph of a man with sunglasses driving a car, looking stressed. Below the photo are several interlocking puzzle pieces, with one piece missing, symbolizing a missing link or a problem.

You simply do not know when customers walk through your door what has happened to them in the past few minutes, hours, or days that have now resulted in them being “difficult.” Think about your morning before you got to work. Did you wake up on time? Was there a traffic jam or accident that made driving terribly stressful? Did you fill your coffee cup all the way, only to spill some of it down your brand new shirt? Have you ever taken your frustration out on someone else?

## Slide 12

**Reasons customers become “difficult”**

- We have all taken our frustration out on someone else, whether consciously or unconsciously
- We learn to express our emotions to get what we want early on
  - Verbal cues
  - Non-Verbal cues
- Customers will use the same attacks and tactics to express their feelings and get what they want

A graphic of several interlocking puzzle pieces, with one piece missing, symbolizing a missing link or a problem.


The answer is “yes”; we all do it. This is a primal response to a negative situation, whether conscious or unconscious. Robert Bacal states that hostile behavior is learned early on by all individuals, because it is how we get what we want. We learn to verbally interact to express how we feel. We also give non-verbal cues to show how we feel and get attention. Robert Bacal also states that once you have worked in the customer service arena long enough, you begin to realize that anger comes at you in the

same manner with different words. He calls it the “rules of the abuse game. “People use the same attacks and tactics to express their feelings and get what they want.

Slide 13

**Reasons customers become “difficult”**

- First, you have to be aware of the “bait”
- Once you recognize customers are angry, you can recognize the “bait” they are throwing out to get you to react
- You can recognize what you need to do to avoid “taking the bait”




Robert Bacal states in his book, titled *Defusing Hostile Customers Workbook*, that the goal of the difficult or angry customer is to control you or the situation. Why? The angry customer wants something, and the customer is not sure at that point how to get what he or she wants. Additionally, the customer is dealing with adrenaline and other behavior-impacting issues that are preventing him or her from interacting in a controlled manner. As long as you need to understand that the difficult customer will try to “bait” you to react using hostile or verbal attacks. The goal of baiting an attack is to get you to react in an emotional manner rather than in a controlled and logical manner. So, what do you do? the difficult customer can get you to react to the situation, the negative interaction will continue. Additionally, nothing will get resolved.

## Slide 14

**Step 2: Recognize your own feelings**

- You are a person, too
- It is natural to want to defend yourself
- However, if you "take the bait" and react, the negative exchange will continue
- If you "take the bait," you are giving control to the other person




You need to recognize your own emotions and accept that you are a human being who will want to react defensively. There is nothing wrong with this. However, if you "react" instead of "interact," the negative exchange will continue. If you "take the bait," you are giving control to the other person. Remember, difficult customers are trying to get help, but they are simply not able to constructively request that help. Instead, they attack.

## Slide 15

**Step 3: Remain calm**

- It is imperative that you remain the voice of reason
- Technique: customers are not angry with you. Customers are angry with the situation



Step three is to remain calm. Dianne Berenbaum of Communico Limited actually says, "step back before you respond," which requires us to stop and recognize that our instincts are to react. Instead, you must be the voice of reason. Do not react to the individual. A technique that you can use is to think, "These customers are not angry with me, the customers are angry with the situation. I just happen to be the person that they are taking it out on." Do not take the customers' anger personally; instead, depersonalize the emotions you are receiving so that you can take the next step.



## Slide 16

**Step 4: Seek clarification**

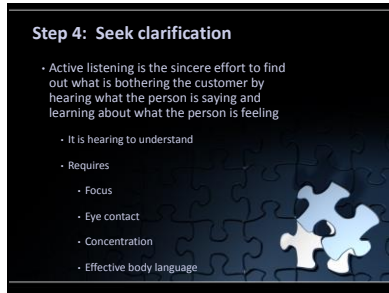
- During this step, you are affording customers the opportunity to discuss issues with you
- Some customers will not be able to express why they are frustrated in a calm way
- Techniques: let customers vent their frustration by demonstrating active listening skills



What is the next step? You will need to find out why customers are angry, sad or frustrated. Learning this information will tell you how to handle the issues or resolve the problems. It will require you to ask questions and listen. Some individuals will not be able to express why they are frustrated in a calm way or without emotion. A great technique is to allow customers the opportunity to talk and vent their frustrations. While customers are talking, you will get a lot of great information about why there are feelings of anger, sadness or frustration.

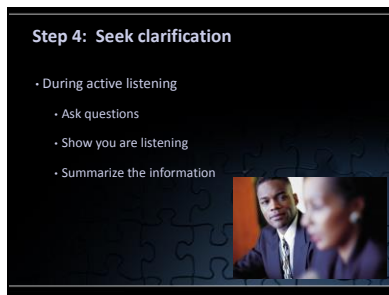
Please keep in mind that you may have aggressive customers who express their frustrations before you can say "hello." You may have passive customers simply stand there with their hands on their hips, which will require you to ask questions. Regardless, try to find out more about the circumstances that led to the customers' frustrations. Basically, you are researching why they feel the way they do. While they are talking, demonstrate active listening skills.

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What is “active listening?” Active listening is the sincere effort to find out what is bothering the customer by hearing what the customer has to say and learning about what the customer is feeling. It is hearing to understand. Active listening takes focus, eye contact, concentration, and effective body language. It enhances how accurately you hear and understand your customers. Active listening is not a passive experience.

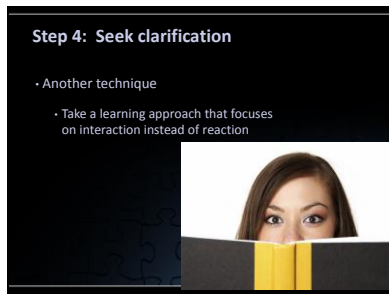
Slide 18



While you are actively listening to customers, you should be asking questions to clarify or understand what they are saying. Keep in mind, you may be listening to someone who will not give you the opportunity to talk. This is fine. When the customer stops talking, you can begin to ask questions; but, make sure you are not planning what you are going to say while the customer is talking. Show you are listening by communicating verbally or with nonverbal cues. This may include saying, “I see” or “I understand.” It may also require you to prompt the customer by asking questions or using phrases like, “Tell me a little more about that.” You may also nod your head or lean forward. Do not look at other work or focus on distractions. If you want to show that you are listening, you must make eye contact and give your undivided attention. Finally, summarize or paraphrase the information you received. This requires you to restate what you heard in your own words. You can use statements like, “so what I

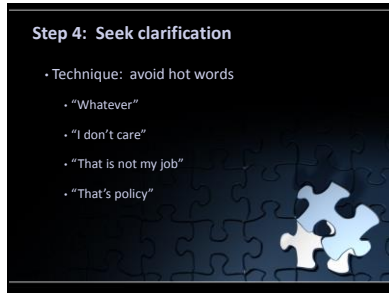
heard is..." This shows that you were paying attention.

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Sometimes, it is hard not to react to what someone is saying. If you feel yourself reacting emotionally, try this technique. Act as though you are in the process of "learning." Your customers are instructing you on the way they feel, and you are collecting information by asking questions and probing informatively. Your goal is to focus on learning and not reacting. This means that your mind is open to what has been said because you are learning. You are also open to new ideas and opinions before formulating your own regarding the situation.

## Slide 20




While you are talking to customers, avoid using certain words or statements, also known as "hot words." For example, it is recommended that you avoid using the word, "whatever." For some reason, this can exacerbate frustrations. It is also recommended that you avoid using the phrase, "I don't care" or "That's not my job." These phrases only generate more anger in a person who is already frustrated. If it is not your job, perhaps you can find a staff member who can help. If the customer is on the phone, give the customer the name and number of the staff member he or she needs to speak with, and attempt to connect the customer to that staff member.

Another phrase to avoid is "that's policy." You may indeed be telling the truth, but telling why something is in place is better than simply saying "that's policy." When customers hear, "that's policy," they feel like they are being blown off. For other hot words or phrases, review the book, *Conflict Prevention in the Workplace*, by Robert Bacal.

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**Step 5: Resolve the issue**

- Work with customers to create a solution
- If a solution cannot be reached, provide the customer with his/her next steps




Once you have gained the customer's confidence, you are in a better position to resolve the issue. Many people think this means that you give the customer whatever he or she wants. However, this is not the case. This step simply means that you work with the customer to create a solution. If a solution cannot be reached, provide the customer with his or her next steps.

Slide 22

**Frequently Asked Questions**

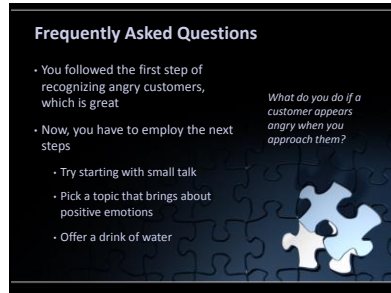
- Sometimes, our angry customers are talkers. And, it seems like they will never stop talking
- Your strategy, especially if on the phone, is to say nothing
- Eventually, the individual will stop talking to find out if you are still paying attention

*What is a strategy for getting a talker to stop talking?*



Sometimes, our difficult customers are talkers. So, what is a strategy for customers who simply won't stop talking, especially since you do not want to interrupt? Remember, interrupting your customers can appear aggressive. A strategy you can use is to simply stop talking altogether. In fact, get as still and quiet as possible. Customers will want to know if you are listening, especially if they are on the phone. This is when you employ the techniques of asking questions or paraphrasing what you heard. Let them know that you are indeed listening and simply did not want to interrupt them, but you have a couple of questions to ask them.

## Slide 23



**Frequently Asked Questions**

- You followed the first step of recognizing angry customers, which is great
- Now, you have to employ the next steps
  - Try starting with small talk
  - Pick a topic that brings about positive emotions
  - Offer a drink of water

*What do you do if a customer appears angry when you approach them?*

Have you ever walked out to the lobby and discovered a customer standing there with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face? Of course you have. This means you have an angry customer. First, I want to commend you on recognizing that the person is not happy, this is step one. Remember, it is very helpful to depersonalize the situation. Next, instead of launching immediately into the customer's negative emotion, try employing small talk. Try to get the customer focused on something that is good and brings other emotions to the surface.


For example, if you know the customer, ask about his or her family. If you do not know the customer, introduce yourself and provide a tour of the office. You may want to see if the customer is thirsty and would like a glass of water. This could throw the customer off and begin to defuse negative emotions. Now, you have to employ the next step, find out what the person is upset about. Let the customer know you care and are listening. This will help move him or her toward a resolution.

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**Frequently Asked Questions**

*What if the customer keeps getting louder and louder?*

- Get very quiet. When you respond, make sure that your response is provided in a quiet manner
- Remove the audience




What if the customer keeps getting louder and louder? There are two strategies that you can employ here. First, get quiet. When you respond, make sure that your response is very quiet, so the customer has to get quiet to hear you. Also, take a look at the customer's environment and mannerisms. If the individual is in a place where others can see and hear him, take him away from the audience. This makes sure that the individual is focused on talking to you and not for other people. If the customer appears to be looking around and speaking towards other people, he is in it for the audience. Once again, take away the audience by going to an office or classroom. If you need to have someone get a supervisor, that is fine. Do not threaten the customer with a supervisor. Simply ask a staff member to notify the supervisor on your way to a more private location.

Slide 25

**Frequently Asked Questions**

*What if I feel myself get angry, what can I do?*

- Remember step 2, you are a person with human emotions
- Take deep breaths and say to yourself
  - This person is not mad at me
  - I am not going to get pulled into this customer's emotional trap
  - I am going to listen and take it one step at a time
- Slow down your responses
  - When we get angry, we tend to jump right in and quickly state what we feel
  - Stop before you speak
  - Speak slowly



You may be asking, "What if I feel myself getting angry, what are some strategies I can take to avoid reacting to the customer's behavior?" First, you are to be commended for recognizing your emotions. This is the second step to controlling the situation. It is natural, as a human being, to want to react. First, take deep breaths. Then, tell yourself "This customer is not mad at me." Now, you may be thinking, "But I just denied him benefits or I just terminated her from a program that impacts the family's income." The reality is, the customer is not angry with you. The

customer is mad at the situation and is simply not sure where to direct that anger.

Also, tell yourself, "I am not going to get pulled into the customer's emotional trap." Remember, you do not have to take the bait. Listen to your customer and take it one step at a time. Another tactic you can try is to slow down your responses. When we are angry, we tend to quickly react and talk fast. Take a deep breath before you speak and speak slowly. If you need to take a break, ask the customer if you can step away. Once again, you could get yourself and the customer a drink to defuse the current emotions.

Slide 26



As a workforce professional, you play a critical role in putting the customer service puzzle together to ensure that our customers receive quality customer service and are able to use our services appropriately. You are going to be faced with challenges, which include dealing with difficult people. There are resources available to help you. For example, you can find more information about some of these techniques, as well as other techniques, in the *Defusing Hostile Customers Workbook* by Robert Bacal. This concludes lesson two in the Customer Service module.